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Triple Captivity: Palestinian Women under Israeli Military Rule in the Time of COVID-19

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Testimonies collected by the graduating Masters of Public Health students at Birzeit University's Institute of Community and Public Health: Hiba Asfour, Aisha Hoshiya, Amani Masalmeh, Rasha Ghanayem, Muna Nadi, Laila Othman, Sameera Ryahe, Yasmeen Wahdan, Shatha Wahsh, Ala'a Yamani, supported by Rita Giacaman and Rula Ghandour.

When universities and schools went into lockdown in Palestine due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Birzeit University shifted to a virtual education model. What was a difficult beginning eventually became a routine that both teachers and students looked forward to. Rita Giacaman, a professor at the university's Institute of Community and Public Health and her TA, PhD candidate Rula Ghandour, often checked in with their students in the Masters of Public Health (MPH) program about their well-being as well as their studies. It quickly became apparent that the students—all women, some of whom worked outside the home and others who didn't—were confronting common problems under lockdown.

As soon as stay-at-home regulations went into force in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), Palestinian women began uploading audio, video, and text messages on social media about how the lockdown and distance learning were impacting them. Giacaman and Ghandour asked their students to share the experiences of the women around them by asking “What is life like during the pandemic?” The responses highlighted what they describe as Palestinian women's triple captivity: to the virus, to Israel's military occupation, and to patriarchal hierarchy.

In this submission to *Palestine Square*, they share excerpts from the eleven stories they collected.

Homeschooling – an additional burden

Palestinian mothers are generally distraught by the added burden of having to homeschool their children and are unanimous in their observation that their children have more fights as they are constrained to small spaces and unable to expend their energy.

“Libraries are closed, [playgrounds] and shops are closed, the children are not allowed to go outside or to receive their friends at home,” one respondent explained. This was only the beginning of their troubles, another respondent reported. “I cannot leave work or take a time off. And I had to leave my two-year-old with my nine and 12-year-old daughters... it was so difficult for me when I got back home and found my daughters crying in fear: someone had rung the doorbell while I was gone and when their two-year-old sister ran to open the door, she fell... My eldest daughter is lost between childhood and her sense of responsibility for her sisters.”

One mother said that she has been constantly anxious since schools had closed. “I had to go to work, but with no schools or preschool facilities open, I had to take my three children with me under great stress, keeping sanitizers on me at all times. There was so much fear and even obsession over my children [getting sick] but I had no choice but to take them with me.”

She added that her children attend a private school and that the process of distance learning had also been stressful. “[The school] exhausts us with homework and I am obliged to teach the classes to my children. My son keeps asking why he is not in preschool. ‘You’re not my teacher,’ he tells me. ‘Why do I have to study?’ We tried to send a call to the school to reduce the academic load, to no avail.”

Psychological stress

On the question of psychological stress in the time of COVID-19, one respondent working at a medical clinic in a refugee camp said that this has been the most difficult experience of her life: “I am a mother of two children, a two-year-old and a three-year-old. I cannot stop thinking about my children, because I still have to engage regularly with people who mix a lot with those who occupy us [the Israeli military], even though the emergency regulations call for not going out of the house unless absolutely necessary.”

A pregnant woman complained of having no clarity about the future due to the uncertainty created by the pandemic. “I feel worried every time I have to go for one of the necessary follow-ups for my pregnancy. I use the utmost of what I can (in terms) of preventive measures. And my husband cannot return from abroad for the birth.”

Lockdown has taken many by surprise, stranding them with little to no support or contact from those closest to them. Women with elderly parents cannot visit them for fear of exposing them to the virus. “I do not even visit my father, who is in his sixties, but call him to make sure he is fine,” one of the respondents stated. “All I can do is pray to God to lift this plague and ask Him to save me and my children, as well as my family and the world, from this unknown disease.”

Another woman described her distress as she struggles to care for her children. “I cannot get help from my family who live in another district, nor from my in-laws who are quarantined in their village. No one can help me with childcare, especially since my husband is a doctor and his patients take up most of his time.”

Another respondent talked about how the pandemic has highlighted and deepened her profound sense of being alone. “I received a phone call about a fire [at my parents' house] thankfully, they were on a trip to Jordan. I left my house and went to their district to check on the house; there was so much damage. [Although] the municipality [helped fix it], I could not go back to my district and had to stay put because of the lockdown. I feel overwhelmed, distressed, burdened, and quite down. I have a real need for family or anyone who can make me feel supported or console me in this unprecedented crisis. No one is here for me or with me.”

Lockdown under occupation

One respondent residing in Area C of the West Bank, under Israel's control, spoke of the vulnerabilities that put her and her parents at risk. “We have no testing sites for people who show symptoms. The Palestinian Authority was only recently permitted to enter [the area] and test people, mostly workers commuting to Israel and their contacts. Many cases were discovered.”

Another respondent with an ID card from the West Bank, who is married to a man from East Jerusalem, is unable to go there without a permit from the Israeli authorities. When the lockdown went into effect, she had been visiting her native West Bank village with her husband. As a result, she says, “my husband is not able to go to work because our village is under lockdown and obtaining a permit for me to go to our home in East Jerusalem is not possible. We are stuck in my village.”

How patriarchy plays out

The women's testimonies revealed that the strains they endure as a result of their menfolk's conduct has been exacerbated under lockdown. While some reported that men were actively sharing household responsibilities, others noted that the gendered division of labor continued.

In a recording widely distributed on social media, a woman went so far as to say that she wanted the police to arrest her for breaking the curfew so that she could be quarantined away from her home. Using the expression *til'at rouhi*—indicating that a situation has become intolerable—she told her teachers and mentors: “My hands hurt from preparing food, washing dishes, and cleaning. The children are driving me crazy, [schools] want us to teach our children... and we don't have Internet! How will our children study? And the men keep [nagging] us to make food. [My husband] brought me flour and asked me to make bread—I am not used to making bread, my fingers hurt! If the lockdown is not lifted in two days, I will walk out. Let them arrest me!”

About The Author:

Rita Giacaman is a Professor at Birzeit University's Institute of Community and Public Health; Rula Ghandour is a Teaching Assistant at the Institute and PhD candidate at the University of

Oslo; The eleven women whose testimonies are excerpted here were collected by the graduating class in the Master of Public Health program.